

# 'LET ME NOT TO THE MARRIAGE OF TRUE MINDS': SHAKESPEARE'S SONNET FOR LADY MARY WROTH

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Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments; love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove.  
O no, it is an ever-fixed mark,  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;  
*It is the star to every wand'ring bark,  
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.*  
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle's compass come;  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.  
If this be error and upon me proved,  
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps one of Shakespeare's most familiar and best-loved poems, Sonnet 116 has often struck readers as curiously detached from the rest of the collection, sharing 'no obvious thematic connections' with the other poems.<sup>2</sup> Carol Thomas Neely perceives 'an "I", drained of particular personality, [which] speaks to no clearly defined audience. Although a dramatic situation is implied, none is realised: neither speaker, audience nor occasion is particularised'.<sup>3</sup> But particularity may be in the eye of the beholder. Although the sonnet's transcendent definition of ideal love is the reason for its success, I will argue that it was written for a unique historical situation – namely the marriages of William Herbert, 3rd Earl of Pembroke, and of his cousin (who was also his mistress), Lady Mary Sidney, in September–November 1604. This new reading is consistent with recent lexical analysis, which places sonnets 104–26 in the early seventeenth century.<sup>4</sup> It also addresses some of the

structural difficulties posed by Sonnet 116, while undermining further the assumption of a simple binary division between two addressees – the so-called Fair Youth and Dark Lady – within the Sonnets as a whole.<sup>5</sup> But perhaps most importantly, Lady Mary Wroth emerges as an original reader of Sonnet 116, and one who responded creatively to that poem throughout her literary career. Acknowledging that Wroth's influence may extend to other Sonnets, we may wish to describe her influence as patronage and to rethink the ways in which Shakespeare was inspired to write the Sonnets, as well as for whom.

The crux upon which this argument turns is lines 7–8, 'It is the star to every wand'ring bark, / Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken'.

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from the Sonnets are taken from *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (London, 1997). I am grateful to Ilona Bell, Penny McCarthy and Mary Ellen Lamb for generously sharing their work with me before its publication. Stanley Wells, Ilona Bell, Clare McManus and Andy Kesson also offered valuable suggestions on a draft version. The italics in the sonnet are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Oxford, 2004), p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> 'Detachment and Engagement in Shakespeare's Sonnets: 94, 116, 129', *PMLA*, 92 (1977), 83–95; p. 88.

<sup>4</sup> See MacDonald P. Jackson, 'Vocabulary and Chronology: The Case of Shakespeare's Sonnets', *Review of English Studies*, 52 (2001), 59–75; p. 75.

<sup>5</sup> See Heather Dubrow's important refutation of this binary in "'Uncertainties now crown themselves assur'd": The Politics of Plotting Shakespeare's Sonnets', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 47 (1996), 291–305.

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The notion of calculating the 'worth' of a star has always seemed strangely inappropriate, not least because 'star' is such a fixed sign of value within the Petrarchan system. Moreover, the assumed permanence of the star as the epitome of constant love seems oddly undermined by its worth's being 'unknown'. Critics have wrestled with the phrase, conscious that how they interpret it will divide them into the ranks of the mawkish or the cynical. Katherine Duncan-Jones glosses 'worth's unknown' as 'the value of which is beyond human measurement'.<sup>6</sup> But for John Kerrigan, line 7 is part of the couplet's insistence that no man could love like this: 'the lover can take Love's altitude, but not reach up and grasp the star, experience its "worth"'.<sup>7</sup> Stephen Booth's parenthetical observation – "'Worth" is imprecisely used in this line' – is appealing.<sup>8</sup> But what if 'worth' were not only a term for 'high value' but also a means of praising someone called 'Wroth'?

Lady Mary Wroth (1587–1653), née Sidney, herself a famous sonneteer and romance writer, would invite the pun on wroth/worth on numerous occasions. It was used of her by Nathaniel Baxter in one of the poems in *Ourania* (1606), which praises Mary and her sister as 'Ladies of worth' (B3v); by William Browne in his description of Wroth as a shepherdess 'full of Worth' in *Britannia's Pastorals* (1613); and by Josuah Sylvester in his elegy for her brother, *Lachrimae Lachrimarum* (1613), which includes the marginal observation:

Although I know None, but a *Sidney's* Muse  
Worthy to sing a *Sidney's* Worthyness:  
None but Your Owne *AL-WORTH* Sidneides  
In whom, her *Unde's* noble Veine renews. (H2)

Wroth also used it extensively about herself: her sonnet sequence *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, prose romance *Urania* and the pastoral comedy *Love's Victory* all include puns on 'worth/worthy' as well as the ubiquitous 'Will'.<sup>9</sup>

Shakespeare was clearly not averse to punning on names in the *Sonnets*, with multiple references to 'Will', and an allusion to 'hate away' (Hathaway) in Sonnet 145. In Sonnet 116, the reference to 'worth's unknown' seems to draw attention to its

own secrecy. That its covert referent is Wroth is strengthened by the fact that it relates back to 'star' and also forwards to 'height'. As suggested above, the worth of Wroth was often seen to depend upon her shared lineage with Sir Philip Sidney, who had invested the Petrarchan cliché of beloved-as-star with a deeper meaning by naming his sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella* (published 1591). That the historical figures of Sidney and Lady Penelope Devereux, later Rich, existed behind these masks was acknowledged by Elizabethan readers including Sir John Harington and Thomas Campion.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Wroth was considered unusually tall for her sex, as glanced at perhaps in Browne's reference to her being apt to 'fit /The height of praise unto the height of wit' (Miv).<sup>11</sup> For this reason, the addressee of William Herbert's poem, 'One with admiration told me . . .', has also been identified as Wroth:

Then he blames the work of Nature,  
'Cause she framed thy body tall,  
Alleging that so high a stature  
Was most subject to a fall,  
Still detracting from thy worth  
That which most doth set thee forth. (44)<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Duncan-Jones, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, p. 342.

<sup>7</sup> John Kerrigan, *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint* (Harmondsworth, 1986; repr. 1999), p. 54.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Booth, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven, CT, 1977), p. 385.

<sup>9</sup> For further discussion of Wroth's puns, see Marion Wynne-Davies, "'For worth, not weakness, makes in use but one": Literary Dialogues in an English Renaissance Family', in *"This Double Voice": Gendered Writing in Early Modern England*, ed. Danielle Clark and Elizabeth Clarke (Houndmills, 2000), pp. 164–84.

<sup>10</sup> See Alison Wall's entry on 'Rich [née Devereux], Penelope', in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret P. Hannay, *Mary Sidney, Lady Wroth* (Farnham, 2010), p. 90.

<sup>12</sup> All quotations from Herbert's poetry are taken from Robert Krueger's *The Poems of William Herbert, Third Earl of Pembroke*, B.Litt. thesis (Oxford, 1961). The italics in the passage are mine. The identification with Wroth is made by Gary Waller in *The Sidney Family Romance: Mary Wroth, William Herbert, and the Early Modern Construction of Gender*.

But perhaps the most important effect of coupling 'worth' and 'height' in Sonnet 116 depends on another interpretation of this term (spelled 'high' in the 1609 Quarto). I cannot avoid hearing a pun on 'high' as in 'named',<sup>13</sup> which directs us to that moment when Lady Mary became a 'Wroth' through her marriage in 1604 – a marriage that would prove famously unhappy, and 'unworthy' of her.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the paradox of 'worth's unknown, although his height be taken' does more than stress the impossibility of valuing a star. Rather, it makes the point that at the very moment when she became a 'Wroth', Lady Mary remained unappreciated by her new husband, who might have accurately gauged her wealth and social position, but was ignorant of her true worth, including perhaps her capacity for deep romantic attachment. This reading would also justify the awkward use of the masculine pronoun, 'his height be taken'.

Shakespeare's interest in the plight of Lady Mary was probably driven initially by the fact that she was the cousin of William Herbert, 3rd Earl of Pembroke, not only the dedicatee of the First Folio but most likely to be the 'only begetter' of the Sonnets.<sup>15</sup> She was also Pembroke's mistress, producing two illegitimate children by him some time after the death of her husband, including a son called William.<sup>16</sup> At exactly what point the relationship between the two cousins became romantic and/or sexual remains unknown, but it may well have predated the weddings of 1604. Josephine A. Roberts notes the way in which the relationship between Pamphilia and Amphilanthus in Part 2 of Wroth's *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* is sealed by a *de praesenti* marriage, described as 'the knott never to bee untide', although they both subsequently marry other people.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, a letter by Lady Mary's father dated 10 October 1604 alludes to the new husband's dissatisfaction with the marriage: 'I finde by him that there was some what that doth discontent him: but the particulars I could not get out of him'.<sup>18</sup> Critics have conjectured that either he had discovered the degree of affection between Lady Mary and her cousin, or that she was no longer a virgin.<sup>19</sup> There are also strong indications that Pembroke's

marriage was affected by his relationship with Wroth. Having delayed his union with the considerable fortune of Lady Mary Talbot for so long that at least one commentator assumed it would never happen, Pembroke finally married just two months after Mary. Like his cousin's union, this also became the subject of gossip, with Rowland Whyte having to reassure the bride's parents that Pembroke was a loving husband and that she was well treated.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, although he had facilitated the marriage by making a substantial contribution to Lady Mary's dowry, Pembroke seems to have acknowledged the suffering it caused him in

(Detroit, 1993), pp. 182–3, though he does not acknowledge the pun on 'worth'.

<sup>13</sup> Shakespeare uses this term to mean 'named' four times: twice in *Love's Labour's Lost* (1.1.168, 249), and once in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (5.1.138) and *Pericles* (15.18). I have found no evidence that he transformed it into a noun but it would be a very simple conversion. All quotations from Shakespeare's plays are taken from *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells et al., 2nd edn (Oxford, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Ben Jonson confided to Drummond that 'My Lord Lisle's daughter, my Lady Wroth, is unworthily married on a jealous husband', in *Informations to William Drummond in The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. David Bevington, Martin Butler and Ian Donaldson, 6 vols. (Cambridge, 2012), vol. 5, p. 377.

<sup>15</sup> The case for Herbert has been made extensively and persuasively by Duncan-Jones in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, pp. 55–69.

<sup>16</sup> Hannay argues for 1624 as the year Wroth gave birth to twins, citing John Chamberlain's letter: 'Here is a whispering of a Lady that hath been a widow above seven years, though she had lately two children at a birth. I must not name her though she be said to be learned and in print' (*Mary Sidney*, p. 251).

<sup>17</sup> See Josephine A. Roberts, 'Introduction', in *The First Part of The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, ed. Josephine A. Roberts (Tempe, AZ, 1995; repr. 2005), p. lxxiv, and also her "'The knott never to bee untide": The Controversy Regarding Marriage in Mary Wroth's *Urania*', in *Reading Mary Wroth*, ed. Naomi J. Miller and Gary Waller (Knoxville, KY, 1991), pp. 109–32.

<sup>18</sup> As quoted by Josephine A. Roberts, *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1983), pp. 11–12. All quotations from Wroth's poetry are taken from this edition.

<sup>19</sup> See Roberts, *First Part*, p. xc, and Hannay, *Mary Sidney*, pp. 107–8.

<sup>20</sup> Hannay, *Mary Sidney*, p. 96.



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his own poetry. In the lyric 'Muse get thee to a Cell', the speaker complains:

Who says that I for things ne'er mine am sad?  
That was all mine which others never had.  
No sighs, no tears, no blood but mine was shed  
For her that now must bless another's bed.

There is evidence, then, not only that Wroth and Herbert registered private feelings about one another in their literary work, but also that they responded to one another's poetry within the context of a relationship.<sup>21</sup> A poet on familiar terms with either of them might have ventured his own (more circumspect) contribution to the theme.

Recently, critics have tied themselves in knots trying to deny that Sonnet 116 has anything literal to say about 'marriage',<sup>22</sup> a response in part, I would suggest, to the overwhelming confidence that popular culture has demonstrated in its matrimonial content.<sup>23</sup> However, the sonnet begins and ends with allusions to the Book of Common Prayer; not only 'if either of you know any lawful impediment why ye may not be lawfully joined in matrimony', but also 'to love and cherish, till death do us part' – these allusions gain greater resonance if we read them in the context of the Wroth and Herbert weddings of 1604.<sup>24</sup> The measured, ceremonial tone of Shakespeare's opening lines now confers legitimacy on a love that is outside the bounds of marriage – an epithalamium for an extra-marital love. The possibility of impediments is acknowledged, anticipating the emotional infidelity of the lovers to one another when they have so recently given themselves to other people, but the sonnet confronts this objection only to dispel it. Hereafter, the union of mere bodies and the 'marriage of true minds' is implicitly juxtaposed, offering reassurance that true love will not be altered by the couple's nuptial circumstances. The sonnet's inherently anti-materialist perspective – that love transcends pleasure in physical beauty ('rosy lips and cheeks') and that it endures to 'the edge of doom' – flatteringly directs attention away from the fact that both addressees were making financially astute marriages.

At the same time, we cannot ignore the poem's structural and tonal ambivalence, created not only

by the final couplet, but also by the repressed 'me' of the opening line. The impression that these parts are detachable might explain why the sonnet has often been appropriated without them, but to contextualize it historically is to bring these parts into greater artistic unity. One way of reading 'Let me not', meaning 'may I never', would be as the continuation of an imagined discussion or argument between Shakespeare, Herbert and Wroth on the subject of their marriages. The poem could even be understood as an act of atonement, with Shakespeare rejecting an earlier cynical stance, not difficult to imagine from the author of *Troilus*

<sup>21</sup> On Wroth and Herbert's dialogue through their poetry, see Garth Bond, 'Amphilanthus to Pamphilia: William Herbert, Mary Wroth, and Penshurst Mount', *Sidney Journal*, 31 (2013), 51–80; and Mary Ellen Lamb, "'Can you suspect a change in me?': Poems by Mary Wroth and William Herbert, Third Earl of Pembroke", in *Re-Reading Mary Wroth*, ed. Katherine R. Larson and Naomi J. Miller with Andrew Strycharski (New York, 2015), pp. 53–68; 58–60. See also Ilona Bell's groundbreaking study of how Wroth censored the more explicit material before publication in 'The Autograph Manuscript of Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*', in *Re-Reading Mary Wroth*, pp. 171–82.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Strier argues that 'The poem is about how persons who are "true minds" love (that is, with constancy to their object, regardless of how the object behaves); it is not, despite how the famous opening line and a half sounds, about how "true minds" love each other'. 'The Refusal to be Judged in Petrarch and Shakespeare', in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Michael Schoenfeldt (Oxford, 2010), pp. 73–89; p. 82.

<sup>23</sup> In the BBC's updating of *Much Ado About Nothing*, directed by Brian Percival for the *Shakespeare Re-Told* season (2005), Benedict plans to read the poem as part of his best man duties at the wedding of Hero and Claudio, only to receive Beatrice's withering response: 'How original!'

<sup>24</sup> Penny McCarthy also focuses on the events of 1604, arguing that the scandalous secret being covered up by Wroth's marriage was her pregnancy by Shakespeare with a child that she later miscarried. 'Autumn 1604: Documentation and Literary Coincidence', in *Mary Wroth and Shakespeare*, ed. Paul Salzman and Marion Wynne-Davies (London, 2015), pp. 37–46. I tend to see the Wroth–Shakespeare relationship as platonic, but am intrigued by the connections McCarthy pursues between Wroth's and Shakespeare's writing, and by her acknowledgement of a possible 'worth/wroth' pun in Sonnet 150, p. 42.

and *Cressida* (c. 1602–3). Similarly, the couplet – ‘If this be error and upon me proved / I never writ, nor no man ever loved’ – becomes less ‘a Pistol-like piece of swaggering’ than an affectionate over-compensation.<sup>25</sup> Rather than ‘the poet protesting too much, losing confidence in his protestations... anticipating rebuttal’, one might see the poem as a piece of self-conscious romantic hyperbole intended to soothe ruffled feelings.<sup>26</sup>

This is not, however, to overlook the deep strain of melancholy and forced self-abnegation that runs through it – and we might find something here of Shakespeare’s own difficulty if we join up the present biographical speculations with the more famous narrative of his passion for a young aristocrat, identified as Pembroke. If Shakespeare earned his place of intimacy with the couple through his ability to idealize their love, to do so was to acknowledge how far he was excluded from it. This inevitably complicates his relationship with the poem, and might explain the shifts between detachment and engagement which characterize the speaker’s role: from ‘Let me not’, to the impersonal asseveration ‘Love is not love’, to the passionate, even breathless ‘O no ...’ The sonnet performs the requisite flattery of its readers while also giving voice to an idealized, unreciprocated love that flatters the poet.

It remains to be asked, what evidence is there for Shakespeare circulating the manuscript of this poem ‘among his private friends’, defined as Wroth and Herbert? The answer is, of course, very little. And yet, this would seem to be a critically propitious moment to envisage the scenario, given the exciting work that has been done recently on Wroth and Herbert, and Wroth and Shakespeare.<sup>27</sup> As Mary Ellen Lamb puts it, ‘The long-term physical proximity underlying the familial and later sexual relationship [of Wroth and Herbert] ... created the reading of each other’s poetry as all but inevitable’.<sup>28</sup> Following their marriages, in the winter of 1604, they could both be found at Baynard’s Castle in London, a place where Wroth kept some of her writing, and from whence they might partake of the festivities at court, including performances of *Othello* and *Measure for*

*Measure*.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, if we look ahead to Wroth’s literary relationship with Ben Jonson, we find a similar kind of writing circle to the one I am imagining for Shakespeare. William Drummond recalled the genesis of Jonson’s ‘Song. That Women Are But Men’s Shadows’: ‘Pembroke and his lady discoursing the Earl said that Woemen were mens shadowes, and she maintained them, both appealing to Johnson, he affirmed it true, for which my Lady gave a pennance to prove it in Verse: hence his Epigrame.’<sup>30</sup> Michael G. Brennan has argued that this lady is far more likely to have been Wroth than Herbert’s wife, and offers it as an example of her ‘enjoying poetic banter with Pembroke and Jonson’.<sup>31</sup> If this were something both relished in 1612, then there is no reason why it should not also have been a feature of their discourse in 1604.

But perhaps most importantly, there is evidence that both William Herbert and Mary Wroth had read Sonnet 116, for they both reuse the phrase ‘Love is not love’ in their own original verse: Herbert in a lyric beginning ‘If her disdain least change in you can move’ (2), and Wroth in the

<sup>25</sup> Duncan-Jones, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, p. 343.

<sup>26</sup> Kerrigan, *Sonnets and A Lover’s Complaint*, p. 53.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Gayle Gaskill’s discussion of Shakespeare’s and Wroth’s sonnets alongside one another, though she ‘neatly sidestep[s] the unanswerable question of whether Wroth was familiar with Shakespeare’s sonnets’. ‘Mary Wroth and Shakespeare: A Conversation in Sonnets’, in *Mary Wroth and Shakespeare*, ed. Salzman and Wynne-Davies, pp. 47–60; p. 47. See also Naomi J. Miller’s compelling fictional representation of Shakespeare and Wroth in her novel, *The Story-maker*, currently under submission. An extract appears as ‘Reimagining Mary Wroth Through Fiction’, *Sidney Journal*, 32 (2014), 39–64.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Ellen Lamb, ‘“Can you suspect”’, pp. 53, 54.

<sup>29</sup> Roberts, *Poems*, pp. 244–5.

<sup>30</sup> *Works of Jonson*, vol. I, p. 142.

<sup>31</sup> Michael G. Brennan, ‘Creating Female Authorship in the Early Seventeenth Century: Ben Jonson and Lady Mary Wroth’, in *Women’s Writing and the Circulation of Ideas: Manuscript Publication in England, 1550–1800*, ed. George L. Justice and Nathan Tinker (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 73–93; p. 85.

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poem 'As these drops fall' (U29).<sup>32</sup> We might assume this to be a memorable phrase for any reader of the 1609 Sonnets – one that would inspire frequent repetition and imitation – but this is surprisingly not the case. A search of the Chadwyck-Healy database to include all phrases beginning 'love/loue is not' between 1590 and 1640 produces only three examples of 'love is not love' in poetry and these are Shakespeare, Herbert and Wroth. If we expand the search to drama, we find only a further two: Shakespeare's *King Lear* (c. 1605, Q 1608) and Barksted and Machin's *The Insatiate Countess* (c. 1608, pub. 1613).<sup>33</sup> The fact that Wroth and Herbert published the only extant poems including this phrase might suggest that they were not dependent on the Quarto but had read Shakespeare's lyric in a manuscript, and hence that they were creatively engaged with Shakespeare on a more direct and personal level. What they do with the phrase may offer us a deeper insight into the kind of readers they were for him.

William Herbert appropriates the phrase in his lyric 'If her disdain least change in you can move', part of a 'poem-and-answer set'<sup>34</sup> created with his friend, Sir Benjamin Rudyard, which was printed in 1660 but circulated in manuscript much earlier, and probably written in the early years of the seventeenth century when Herbert and Rudyard were at the Inns of Court together.<sup>35</sup> The Shakespeare allusion appears in the first stanza:

If her disdain least change in you can move  
 You do not love,  
 For while your hopes give fuel to your fire  
 You sell desire.  
 Love is not love, but given free,  
 And so is mine, so should yours be. (2)

The phrase serves as a touchstone to prove the truth of professed affection, and in this way it remains true to its purpose in Sonnet 116. However, its context is more overtly homosocial, operating within Petrarchan conventions according to which reciprocal affection by the woman is not expected or even desirable for the purposes of poetry. Furthermore, the impact of the Shakespearean phrase is partly lost by its being a restatement of what has already been

said: 'If her disdain least change in you can move / You do not love'. The argument was apparently clear in the speaker's mind, and he made it in his own words first, but when it needed reiteration he turned to Shakespeare (whose *King Lear* had placed it in a similar context of male rivalry). In this respect, the lyric is consistent with much of Pembroke's verse, described by Gary Waller as "'coterie social transactions'", written for or within a group of friends, perhaps on particular, though relatively common, social or erotic occasions'. Its casual appropriation of another writer's words is of a piece with its relaxed attitude towards lyric convention:

[Pembroke] is content to let the dominant aesthetic ideology of the male-dominated court and its acceptance of the decorativeness of lyric poetry speak through his verse without the anguish of having to call into question the system that brought them into being. He finds a pattern of discourse already existing and a role waiting for him to fill.<sup>36</sup>

The case was obviously vastly different for his cousin, Lady Mary Wroth, and it is no surprise to

<sup>32</sup> I am indebted to Duncan-Jones for the connection between Sonnet 116 and Pembroke's lyric, 68. The connection with Wroth's writing is my own.

<sup>33</sup> In *King Lear*, Shakespeare reuses his own phrase in the mouth of the King of France as he proleptically chides Burgundy for abandoning Cordelia once her price has fallen: 'What say you to the lady? Love's not love / When it is mingled with regards that stands / Aloof from th'entire point' (1.1.238–40). It is notable that although the phrase is now elided, 'Love's not', Shakespeare retains it in the same position, after the caesura. In *The Insatiate Countess*, the phrase is used by Gniaca to upbraid Isabella for her abrupt transfer of her affections: 'Wrong not yourself, me, and your dearest friend: / Your love is violent, and soon will end. / Love is not love, unless love doth persèver: / That love is perfect love that loves forever', *Four Jacobean Sex Tragedies*, ed. Martin Wiggins (Oxford, 2009), 3.2.79–82.

<sup>34</sup> See Arthur Marotti, 'Manuscript, Print and the Social History of the Lyric', in *The Cambridge Companion to English Poetry, Donne to Marvell*, ed. Thomas N. Corns (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 52–79; p. 55.

<sup>35</sup> Krueger lists the poem as appearing in six additional manuscripts, from the 1620s, in *Poems of Herbert*, p. 2. On the possibility of its being written as early as 1603, see Waller, *Sidney Family Romance*, p. 165.

<sup>36</sup> Waller, *Sidney Family Romance*, pp. 166, 167.

find her poem (and indeed her poetic canon) demonstrating a deeper and more ambivalent engagement with Shakespeare's Sonnets.<sup>37</sup>

Most obviously, Sonnet 116's fantasy of an enduring and unalterable love speaks to one of the overarching themes of Wroth's literary work, namely the desire for constancy.<sup>38</sup> Its recurrence in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* and in both parts of the *Urania* seems likely to have been prompted by Wroth's relationship with the errant Pembroke, whose sexual transgressions were well known and who might easily qualify as a 'remover [who] removes'. A further point of contact is the desire in Wroth's poetry to identify true love, as opposed to the false and meretricious. Notable examples include, in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, Song 5: 'Unworthy love doth seeke for ends / A worthy love butt worth pretends / Nor other thoughts itt proveth' (P35), and the lyric beginning 'It is nott love which you poore fooles do deeme / That doth apeare by fond, and outward showes' (P46). What is particularly fascinating about Wroth's engagement with Sonnet 116 is the fact that it seems to have endured over the course of more than fifteen years, and that her response to the poem shifted considerably – from resentment of its persuasiveness, to identification with its image of unrequited love, to optimism that it might affect some alteration in her life.

In Book 1 of *The First Part of . . . Urania*, which was published in 1621 but perhaps written between 1618 and 1620, the character of Bellamira (whose name means 'beautiful Mary') meets Amphilanthus (an obvious analogue for Pembroke).<sup>39</sup> She laments her abandonment by a king who at first pursued her so ardently that her father married her off to someone else in order to preserve her virtue. But after her husband's death, the king's affections waned:

When I was a Widdow, and suffered so many crosses, my poore beauty decayd, so did his love, which though he oft protested to bee fixed on my worth, and love to him, yet my face's alteration gave his eyes distaste, or liberty from former bands, to looke else where, and so he looked, as tooke his heart at last from me, making that a poore servant to his false eyes, to follow still their change. I grieved for it, yet never lessned my affection . . .

(390)

Bellamira uses the terms 'fixed', 'worth', 'love' and 'alteration' in close proximity to one another, suggesting a link with Sonnet 116. Her claim that once her beauty was lost, her lover's affections strayed, resonates ironically with the sonnet's observation that 'Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks / Within his bending sickle's compass come'. We might speculate that Wroth was here recalling her own private experience. The years 1614–16 had been particularly traumatic, with the deaths of her husband and then her son (at this point her only child), as well as considerable financial pressures, and she might well have considered her beauty to have faded, with a resultant slackening of Pembroke's affections. From such a vantage point, she might remember with bitterness and resentment the use Pembroke had once made of Sonnet 116 in Bellamira's allusion to his 'protest[ing] to bee fixed on my worth'. At the same time, Shakespeare's sonnet underpins her own heroic, unrequited passion, with its celebratory imagery of a love that 'bears it out, even to the edge of doom'.

When Amphilanthus asks Bellamira to share some of her verses, she expresses a deep sense of alienation from her own poetry and, by implication, from her own past:

<sup>37</sup> Dubrow argues for the 'extraordinary affinities between Wroth and Shakespeare' as sonneteers, including 'doubts about their own poetic achievements', their 'complex relationship to narrativity', the isolation and alienation which characterize both speakers, and their shared obsession with betrayal. See *Echoes of Desire: English Petrarchism and its Counter-Discourses* (Ithaca, NY, 1995), pp. 145–6. See also Ilona Bell's discussion of the ways in which 'Shakespeare's strategies of evasion and concealment resemble Wroth's' in 'Sugared Sonnets among their Private Friends: Mary Wroth and William Shakespeare', *Mary Wroth and Shakespeare*, ed. Salzman and Wyne-Davies, pp. 9–24; p. 16.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Elaine V. Beilin, "'The onely perfect vertue": Constancy in Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*', *Spenser Studies*, 2 (1981), 229–45.

<sup>39</sup> Hannay, *Mary Sidney*, p. 37. Roberts also argues that Bellamira is one of the key fictional self-portraits Wroth created in her work, specifically 'highlight[ing] her private relationship with Pembroke' (*First Part*, p. lxxi).



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'Truely Sir,' said she, 'so long it is since I made any, and the subject growne so strange, as I can hardly cal them to memory which I made, having desired to forget all things but my love, fearing that the sight, or thought of them, would bring on the joyes then felt, the sorrowes soone succeeding.' (390)

There may be a trace here of Wroth's own perceived distance from Sonnet 116, whose romantic idealism is a relic of her youth, and which may be similarly painful to re-examine. Nevertheless, Bellamira offers up to Amphilanthus the lyric 'As these drops fall', which she describes herself as having written after the king's neglect had begun but before she despaired of ever recapturing his affection: 'one time after he had begun to change, hee yet did visite mee, and use mee somtimes well, and once so kindly, as I grew to hope a little, whereupon I writ these lines' (391). The poem expresses relief that her lover is softening towards her, but also fears that the change may not be lasting. The final two stanzas read:

But if like heate drops you do wast away  
Glad, as disburden'd of a hot desire;  
Let me be rather lost, perish in fire,  
Then by those hopefull signes brought to decay.

Sweete be a louer puer, and permanent,  
Cast off gay cloathes of change, and such false slights:  
Love is not love, but where truth hath her rights,  
Else like boughs from the perfect body rent.

(U29, 17–24)

This allusion to Sonnet 116 works in contrasting ways on the levels of fiction (Bellamira) and autobiography (Wroth). For Bellamira at the time of writing, 'Love is not love' becomes itself an 'ever-fixèd mark' within the oceanic instability of their relationship (6, 9) – an ideal to aspire to. There might also be an echo of Sonnet 80 in the desire that she be 'not by those hopefull signes brought to decay' (20) through the same excess of love and hope.<sup>40</sup> But as she recites the lyric now before Amphilanthus, there is no chance of the quoted sonnet being able to move the absent lover. The same cannot be said of Wroth, for whom the key feature of the lyric is that it is performed before

Amphilanthus, i.e. Pembroke, as reader of the romance. In this context, the phrase 'Love is not love' potentially forces Pembroke to confront his falling-off from the romantic sentiments that inspired Sonnet 116. It also upbraids him with his own poetry, wherein he appropriated 'Love is not love' as an avowal of his unalterable passion. For all that the poem has lost any possible influence over Bellamira's romantic affairs, it retains a certain power over those of Wroth. Furthermore, by reading the line 'Love is not love, but where truth hath her rights' against the backdrop of Sonnet 116, which is so explicit in its allusion to the marriage ceremony, 'rights' potentially becomes 'rites'. Neither Bellamira nor Wroth may be asking for these to be performed literally – although Bellamira (like Wroth) is free in her widowhood to marry, her beloved (like Pembroke) is still married. Yet there might be an allusion to the other kind of rite owed to love, namely sexual consummation, and if 1624 is the correct date of Wroth's delivery of twins, then this appeal was not made in vain. In this sense, Wroth appropriates a sonnet which celebrates unreciprocated passion, in terms that belie any possibility of physical intimacy, and transforms it into a powerfully erotic poem, which draws attention to the physical desires of the female speaker, as well as lingering suggestively over her 'perfect body'.<sup>41</sup>

Of the two intended recipients of Sonnet 116, then, Lady Mary Wroth seems to have experienced the deepest affinity with the poem, to the extent that she could still recall its imagery (and its

<sup>40</sup> 'Then if he thrive, and I be cast away / The worst was this: my love was my decay'. Sonnet 80, which includes puns on 'worth', is discussed further below.

<sup>41</sup> There is an additional use of 'Love is not love' by Wroth in Rodomandro's masque which celebrates the triumph of Honour over Cupid in the second part of the *Urania*. The third stanza of the song reads: 'Love's nott Love, that vainely flings / Like a harmfull waspe that stings / Therin I did miss / Desire should nott bee stil'd love / Butt with honors wings to move / Bright love tells us this' (N5, p. 198). On the love-god's importance in Wroth's work, see Jane Kingsley-Smith, *Cupid in Early Modern Literature and Culture* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 121–32.



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emotional context) more than fifteen years after it was written. It remains to ask whether this affinity had developed into a more lasting relationship between herself and the poet. As Duncan-Jones observes, Shakespeare's idea of patronage initially looks to have been overwhelmingly male:

Other ambitious writers in this period cultivated and sought to please, not only the Queen, but also courtly patronesses, the wives, widows, and daughters of noblemen. Such ladies often had considerable wealth and influence, as well as leisure in which to read and respond to literary works which would perhaps be given little more than a cursory glance by their menfolk ... Yet there is not one single instance of Shakespeare addressing a work to a well-known woman, whether royal, noble or gentle. From the Earl of Southampton to Sir John Salisbury to Mr W. H. to Francis Manners, Earl of Rutland, Shakespeare's visible patrons were all male.<sup>42</sup>

There remains the possibility of an 'invisible' patron. John Dover Wilson speculated that the Countess of Pembroke commissioned the first seventeen sonnets as a coercive gift for her son on his seventeenth birthday.<sup>43</sup> There may be a graceful compliment in Sonnet 3's avowal: 'Thou art thy mother's glass, and she in thee / Calls back the lovely April of her prime' (9-10), April also being the month of Herbert's birth. This would suggest a more flexible idea of patronage as something not necessarily rendered explicit through a dedication or title, but registered within the poem through covert allusion: the function of the verse is not to celebrate the patron's virtues but to perform a persuasive act on their behalf.

The evidence for Wroth acting as a patron whilst being influenced in her own poetry brings us back to Jonson. In 1612 he dedicated *The Alchemist* to Wroth, one year after he had dedicated *Catiline* to Pembroke, and what Brennan describes as 'the implicit pairing in patronage of William Herbert and Lady Mary Wroth' was notably replicated in the 1616 Folio, where *The Alchemist* was immediately followed by *Catiline*, and where an Epigram to Herbert was succeeded by one to Wroth.<sup>44</sup> We referred earlier to the possibility that Wroth had inspired Jonson's 'Song. That Women Are But Men's Shadows', and it would certainly be possible

to read this kind of playful but also private patronage back into the first decade of the seventeenth century, and her acquaintance with Shakespeare. As Brennan states, 'By the end of 1604 Lady Mary ... was already firmly ensconced in the personal circles of both the new king and queen', and this 'early prominence at the new Stuart royal court' might well have translated into early efforts of dedication and solicitations for patronage.<sup>45</sup>

If we reconsider all of Shakespeare's sonnets which contain the word 'worth', we can glimpse the possibility of Wroth functioning not as a Dark Lady but as a 'Begetter'. The word 'worth' appears in eighteen poems, and, as we might expect in a collection so often concerned with questions of value, many of these appear unremarkable. However, there are at least two which might give us pause, both dealing with poetic inspiration and/or patronage. Sonnet 38 reads:

How can my Muse want subject to invent  
While thou dost breathe, that pour'st into my verse  
Thine own sweet argument, too excellent  
For every vulgar paper to rehearse?  
O give thyself the thanks, if aught in me  
Worthy perusal stand against thy sight:  
For who's so dumb, that cannot write to thee,  
When thou thyself dost give invention light?  
*Be thou the tenth Muse, ten times more in worth*  
Than those old nine which rhymers invocate;  
And he that calls on thee, let him bring forth  
Eternal numbers to outlive long date.

If my slight Muse do please these curious days,  
The pain be mine, but thine shall be the praise.<sup>46</sup>

Like 116, this sonnet stands out from the surrounding poems, and Helen Vendler suggests that it might once have belonged to a different group:

38, though it has some matter (and the words 'worth' and 'praise') in common with 39, bears no thematic trace of

<sup>42</sup> Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Ungentle Shakespeare: Scenes from his Life* (London, 2001), p. 150.

<sup>43</sup> John Dover Wilson, *The Sonnets* (Cambridge, 1966), p. c.

<sup>44</sup> Brennan, 'Creating Female Authorship', pp. 76, 84.

<sup>45</sup> Brennan, 'Creating Female Authorship', p. 74.

<sup>46</sup> The italics in the sonnet are mine.

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the separation of lovers which is the common content of 36 and 39. It seems to me that a 'break' such as this one lends credence to the argument . . . that in arranging the sequence Shakespeare (or another editor) made room for some earlier and less practiced sonnets among the ones more clearly written in close temporal sequence.<sup>47</sup>

'Earlier and less practiced sonnets', or perhaps later ones, are addressed to a different, female patron. This would certainly explain the awkwardness of the speaker's demand 'Be thou the tenth Muse' to a man, given that Muses are conventionally female. The addressee's identification as Wroth might be suggested not only by allusions to 'worth' and 'Worthy', but by the fact that this is one of Shakespeare's most Sidneian sonnets.<sup>48</sup>

The other patronage poem which resonates in this context is Sonnet 80:

O how I faint when I of you do write,  
Knowing a better spirit doth use your name,  
And in the praise thereof spends all his might,  
To make me tongue-tied speaking of your fame.  
*But since your worth, wide as the ocean is,*  
The humble as the proudest sail doth bear,  
My saucy bark, inferior far to his,  
On your broad main doth wilfully appear.  
Your shallowest help will hold me up afloat,  
Whilst he upon your soundless deep doth ride;  
*Or, being wracked, I am a worthless boat,*  
He of tall building, and of goodly pride.  
Then if he thrive, and I be cast away,  
*The worst was this: my love was my decay.*

Possible evidence of Wroth's familiarity with this sonnet was produced above, and the sonnet's use of the terms 'worth', 'worthless' and 'worst' starts to look like deliberate wordplay. The inclusion of a pun on 'wilfully'<sup>49</sup> suggests that Shakespeare might be coupling his patrons, Herbert and Wroth, together, just as Jonson would do in the Folio years later. Furthermore, the poem bears some interesting thematic similarities with 116. Where, in that sonnet, the worthy star offered guidance to the 'wandering bark', here the worthy ocean supports the poet's 'saucy bark' – a connection which did not go unnoticed by John Benson, who placed 116 immediately after a conflation of 80 and 81 in his *Poems* (1640).<sup>50</sup>

To conclude, if we accept the Pembroke/Wroth marriages of 1604 as a context for Sonnet 116, the implications for our understanding of the rest of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* are profound. For a start, we have a precedent for there being occasional sonnets within the collection – the fact that we have not been able to explain an occasion does not mean it did not exist. We are also encouraged to be more receptive to Q's fragmentation into small clusters and sub-groups, so that there can be more than one patron, just as there seems to be more than one 'Fair Youth' and 'Dark Lady'. Indeed, the major impediment for me in identifying the 'worth' pun more extensively is the centripetal force by which it will draw Wroth back towards the role of Dark Lady.<sup>51</sup> To return to women's function in the *Sonnets* as confined to the subject of misogynist invective is not the intention of this chapter. Rather, its most important discovery seems to me to be the emergence of Lady Mary as a sympathetic and highly engaged reader for Shakespeare, one whose concerns and experiences influenced his writing, which then offered creative stimulus to her own. The ways in which she interprets 'Let me not' suggest a profound understanding of the conflicts which structure it – 'a marriage of true minds' indeed.

<sup>47</sup> Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), p. 191.

<sup>48</sup> Duncan-Jones observes the echoes of *Astrophil and Stella* 3 (*Shakespeare's Sonnets*, p. 186), while Vendler comments on the rarity of Muses in Shakespeare's collection: 'The fact that the Muse appears chiefly in the context of poetic rivalry suggests that it is the use of this figure by other poets which occasions its appearance in Shakespeare' (*Art*, p. 198).

<sup>49</sup> This is also noted in Vendler, *Art*, p. 358.

<sup>50</sup> Benson's editing of the *Sonnets* has only recently received serious attention from scholars who have shown him to be in many ways a sensitive reader. See, for example, Margreta De Grazia, *Shakespeare Verbatim: The Reproduction of Authenticity and the 1790 Apparatus* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 163–73; and Cathy Shrank, 'Reading Shakespeare's *Sonnets*: John Benson and the 1640 *Poems*', *Shakespeare*, 5 (2009), 271–91.

<sup>51</sup> See Gaskill's argument that Wroth puts on the role of Dark Lady only to redefine its terms: 'Wroth's lady is "as dark as night" because the love object, her "chief light", who once shone on her like the sun, has withdrawn' ('Wroth and Shakespeare', p. 51).